



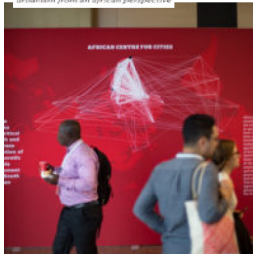
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New turns in urban thinking from the south

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By: **Sean O' Toole**Programme Type: **PUBLIC DISCOURSE**Programme: **African Centre for Cities International Urban Conference**

In his keynote address at the recent International Urban Conference, hosted by the African Centre for Cities (ACC) at the University of Cape Town (UCT), visiting Indian scholar Gautam Bhan spoke of a "southern turn in urban studies". Over the course of the next three days this discursive shift formed a repeated point of deliberation among conference delegates, its emergence affirmed, debated and even contested.

Vanessa Watson, an ACC executive and urban planning scholar at UCT, characterised the new research and theoretical positions emblematic of this scholarly turn as still "scrambling at the edge of northern hegemony". Teresa Caldeira, a professor of urban planning at the University of California, Berkeley, referenced Bhan's phrasing and highlighted others such as "urbanism of the south" and "southern urbanism".

Speaking during a roundtable session with AbdouMaliq Simone, Alcinda Honwana and Jennifer Robinson that concluded the conference, Caldeira expressed anxiety at the use of "southern urbanism" in the singular. "It is clear that cities in the south cannot be associated with one unitary form of urbanism," she said.

A quiet observer throughout much of the conference, Simone addressed this idea of a specialist body of knowledge informed by the material circumstances of cities in the so-called global south through a biographical anecdote.

"When I took my first official job in an African city, Abidjan in 1976, there was little urban research anywhere," said Simone. "Africans were largely deemed biologically and culturally incapable of worth. Cities were largely conceived as the immanence of disaster, replete with countless insufficiencies."

Working in these impoverished circumstances, continued Simone, "required an appreciation of what was present, what had a sense of there-ness". This kind of research by intuition and sight, he added, demanded "a sense of generosity and patience, and, above all, a willingness to recognise oneself through a range of different and disparate languages, images and dispositions".

Simone's statement bookended an energetic programme of events that included 70 panels, 16 roundtable sessions, a half-dozen keynote presentations and various artistic interventions.

The academic component of the conference showcased the diverse methodologies at the disposal of researchers, including data research and fieldwork. Possibly one of the more striking facets of the ACC conference was the use of visuals and aesthetics by urban researchers to augment their hard research. This visual turn in urban studies is by no means new.

Already in 1993, Australian cultural geographer Jane Margaret Jacobs noted "an increased recognition of symbolic and representational realms ... in the constitution and mediation of social and material processes". This visual turn has motivated researchers like Sylvaine Conord and Cécile Cuny to investigate how photography changes the conditions, rules, objectives and formats of urban knowledge.

This scholarly emphasis on the visual, notes researcher Claire Colomb in her book *Staging the New Berlin* (2012), developed in parallel, and is partly related to, new discursive turns in urban studies. "It has been characterized by an expansion of the repertoire of qualitative methods used to analyse urban representations to include methods commonly used in cultural and media studies, in particular semiotics," writes Colomb.

As was evident at ACC's conference, researchers use visuals for various reasons: to augment a statement, to bear witness to fieldwork, to cultivate affect, to rescue a data-driven PowerPoint presentation.



"One of the problems with academic theory and discourse is that things only need to make sense cognitively," said ACC's founding director Edgar Pieterse. Understanding something as multifaceted as a city requires drawing on more than just reasoning and logic. "There is intuition too."

The conference opened with a musical performance by folk singer Asanda "Msaki" Mvana. The East London-born musician's "songs of identity, hope and place" were accompanied by a visual collage, by VJ Tseliso Monaheng, of key moments from the recent student activism around transformation, pedagogy, curricula and funding at South Africa's universities.

Mostly filmed from within the student collective, the black-and-white footage included impressionistic, bottom-up views of Johannesburg's verticality. This experiential and participant-based view of the city contrasted with the top-down photographic view of contemporary Mumbai offered by New York-based anthropologist Vyjayanthi Rao in her keynote, the conference's first.

Taken by Rao during a visit to a friend, the colour photo showed Mumbai's aspirational new tower blocks looming over a crowded world of formal low-rise buildings and erratic clustering of dwellings suggestive of urban slums. The photo was dispassionate and summarising.

I am, of course, overstating the roles performed by these two visual moments early into the conference. But the use of visual aids as an addendum to presenting research and making assertions is never straightforward. Photography, for instance, involves positionality. What am I looking at? From what privileged (or not) vantage? To what end? These ostensibly simple questions about orientation and intention key into larger arguments discussed at the conference.

"We started this forum with the idea of being critical and propositional," noted Caldeira during her roundtable. She was once again referring to Bhan's opening keynote, in particular his proposal that sympathetic scholars should match criticism with proposal – a view widely endorsed by delegates.

“Most of us accept the need to navigate this space, but I'm not sure how to do it,” stated Caldeira. She however cautioned against unambiguous acceptance of Bhan's proposal. “What are the limits of my intervention as a researcher?” asked Caldeira. “What does it mean to be a public intellectual? What are its limits?”

These questions also occupied Alcinda Honwana, a Mozambique-born development advisor to the United Nations and anthropologist whose research focuses on youth. “How do we translate what we do into practice?” asked Honwana.

“On the one hand it is about the kinds of questions we ask in our research, how we look at our own environments, who we listen to, and how we try to read what's going on,” elaborated Honwana. “There is a tendency among political practitioners to find solutions that will fit all. Research shows that it is important to go deep and look at the specific as well.”

In a discussion of her practice Rao offered various strategies and methodologies for going deep. It is helpful to know that Rao believes the city is a “territory consolidated through a structural coupling of people and infrastructures,” to quote from her 2014 essay in the edited volume *Infrastructural Lives: Urban Infrastructure in Context*. Like Bhan, Rao believes that this structural coupling is “historically specific in different urban contexts”.

Her research into Mumbai is informed by the traditional scholarly practices of fieldwork and ethnography, but is augmented by artistic work. A member of the Spatial Ethnography Lab, a collective that uses people-focused research and mapping to study the production of localities within cities, Rao has also collaborated with Samuha, a Bangalore-based art collective.

Rao told her audience that southern urbanism could learn a great deal from productive shifts in the field of visual art. Unlike modernism, a practice she described as grounded in constraining nationalisms, contemporary art embodies a trans-national set of practices that are more open in their form, despite the constant domesticating pressures of the art market.

The role of visibility and visual art as tools for analysing the city were repeatedly discussed at the ACC's conference. In his keynote address Tijuana-based Raúl Cárdenas Osuna spoke of art as a form of “contextual analysis” that he deploys in service of understanding pressing social issues, including nutritional poverty, crime and imprisonment.

The main vehicle for Cárdenas Osuna's work is ToroLab. Founded in 1995, it is equal parts artist collective and social design facilitator. Its projects have included social landscaping and food growing schemes in Tijuana, as well as a fashion line (Toro Vestimenta) that addresses the needs of the areas migratory population.

ToroLab's interdisciplinary practice and performative investigative process, writes curator Nato Thompson in the *Art and Social Justice Education* (2012), “treads a fine line between aesthetic and political research”. Often it wilfully breaches these categories in what Cárdenas Osuna refers to as a “contradisciplinary” methodology. In 2013 he animatedly addressed a group of city bureaucrats outside Johannesburg. “The time for protest has ended; the time for proposal has begun,” he stated, reiterating a long-held belief.

“In the first decade we tried to develop a universal methodology that totally failed,” Cárdenas Osuna told his Cape Town audience. “Don't do damage,” he cautioned. “You have to be very responsible with your projects.”

Cárdenas Osuna's art-informed, interventionist approach is distinct from the work of Filip de Boeck, a Belgian anthropologist best known for his innovative, ranging and sometimes eccentric research in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In recent years, De Boeck has collaborated with the photographer Sammy Baloji in documenting the ravaged urban surfaces of Kinshasa.

De Boeck's practice is not only emblematic of the visual turn in southern urban studies, but also functions as a benchmark by which other interventions can be gauged. One of De Boeck's achievements as a writer is the way he holds academic research in a kind of tension with the visual. His focus on the surface forms of Kinshasa, a stalled modernist city marked by evidence of colonial extraction and social ordering, bears this out.

“De Boeck reads some kind of meaning into what otherwise might be read as depletions, pushing urban studies in new directions,” noted geographer Kate Dawson in her review of *Suturing the City* (2016), his book collaboration with Baloji. “This linguistic focus is met with an absorbing visuality, where Baloji's work confirms, resists and emphasises De Boeck's ethnographic narratives.”

Speaking at the ACC conference, which Baloji was unfortunately unable to attend due to his mother's unexpected death, De Boeck expanded on his interest in photography as a tool for urban research.

“It is difficult to talk about the city without visualising it,” he stated. “The city would not exist without photography, and photography would not exist without the city. They go hand in hand.” He speculated that this close affinity has something to do with a condition that conjoins the two: surface. “That is what we have been doing, covering the surface, but at the same time we are uncovering an interior, what [Walter] Benjamin called the ‘optical unconsciousness’.”

De Boeck admitted that the formal register of Balaji’s photographs was “very classical” – something he had requested. Looking ahead to their further collaborations, he stated: “We will try and develop the photography in different directions. There is still much to be done.”

A sense of incompleteness and further work at hand characterised many of the summations to conversations at the conference. Simone brought this unfinished project into sharp relief when he stated: “Everyday life is a material challenge for the majority of residents in many parts of the world.” But, he nonetheless conceded, it was important into the context of the conference to reflect on progress too.

Invoking the legacy of Trinidadian-born activist and Pan-Africanist, Stokely Carmichael, Simone asked a series of questions: “How did we come this far? How have we endured? What have we done with that endurance?” He did not propose any answers. Those answers, such that they could be definitively posed, formed the substance of the ACC’s invigorating conference on new urban thinking from the south.

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